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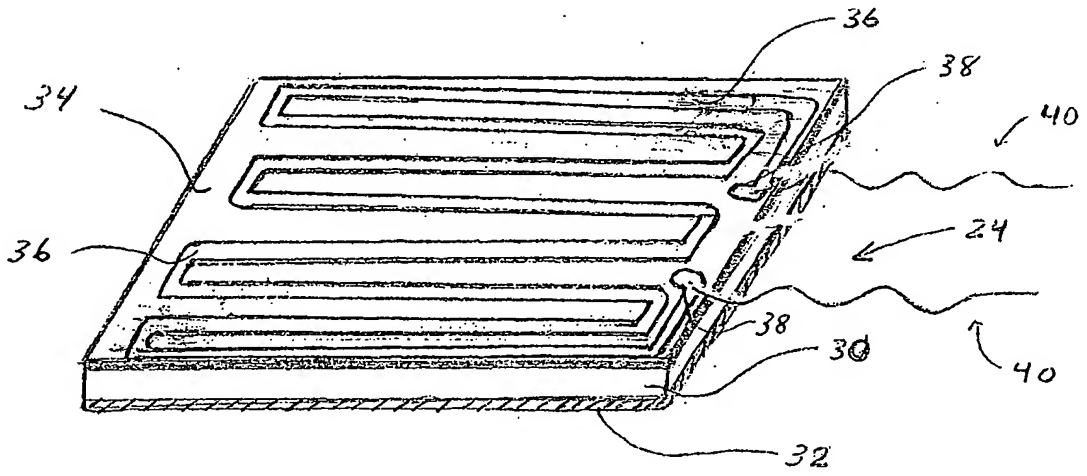
(54) Title: METHOD FOR THERMALLY PRINTING A DYE IMAGE ONTO A THREE DIMENSIONAL OBJECT USING FLEXIBLE HEATING ELEMENTS



(57) Abstract: The present invention relates to a method for thermally printing a pre-selected dye image (45) onto a three dimensional object (16). The method involves placing an image carrier sheet (24) containing a pre-selected dye image (45) over the object (16). A flexible membrane (26) is lowered over the object (16) and the image carrier sheet (24). A vacuum is established under the membrane (26) causing the image carrier sheet (24) to conform to the shape of the object (16). The membrane (26) or image carrier sheet (24) carry flexible heating elements (36), which are heated, to thermally transfer the dye image (45) onto the object (16). The flexible heating elements (36) can be made by etching an electrical circuit in a metal foil (34) which is bonded to a film substrate (30).

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